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Keeping Improvement in Mind

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Comprehensive teaching frameworks can help schools empower teachers, not just judge them.

A familiar scenario plays out in schools across the United States each year. It is the final day of standardized testing. Students dutifully fill in the bubbles and respond to a few open-ended questions. Later that day, the tests are collected and sent away to be evaluated. By the end of the school year, a document will arrive in each student's mailbox containing a judgment on his or her competence in several domains.

Although teachers and administrators understand the need for accountability, they often question the benefits of such large-scale standardized student assessments. After all, accountability testing takes time away from student learning; the results provide little information that students can use directly to improve; and the process forces students to passively accept a decontextualized judgment that is handed down from an outside source on the basis of a small sample of their performance.

Unfortunately, we are in danger of duplicating this process, with all its flaws, in our current push for more rigorous teacher evaluation. Like high-stakes student assessment, high-stakes teacher evaluation threatens to be an occasional event that is disconnected from day-to-day teaching and learning, producing results that do not help teachers improve their performance and placing teachers in a passive role as recipients of external judgment.

Using Teaching Frameworks to Empower Teachers

For several years, we've worked with teams of teachers, helping them develop their capacity for self-assessment using two prominent, comprehensive frameworks for effective practice: Robert Marzano's Art and Science of Teaching model (2007) and [Charlotte Danielson's](#) Framework for Teaching (2007). Both of these models systematically describe various components of research-based effective classroom practices.

Through this work, we've come to understand that as valuable as such comprehensive frameworks can be, it's not enough to simply put them in place as rubrics that supervisors use to rate teachers' effectiveness. Just as students need to be actively involved and empowered as partners in classroom assessment (Stiggins, 2004), teachers need to be actively involved and empowered as leaders in the formative use of the tools that will be the basis for their own summative evaluation.

The most effective supervision and evaluation systems empower teachers to accurately assess their own practice and self-diagnose areas for growth. In such systems, teachers use comprehensive frameworks throughout the school year to collect data related to their teaching, reflect on their practice, and identify specific instructional strategies they can work on to improve their repertoire of skills.

The school culture in such systems supports teachers by recognizing the need for improvement as an asset rather than a liability. Here are some of the beliefs that are central to such supervision and evaluation systems.

Comprehensive teaching frameworks are not just for evaluation.

In the classroom, effective teachers use rubrics not just as summative tools to determine students' grades, but also as exemplars that they apply across entire units to guide students' efforts to improve. The language of the rubrics becomes the language of the curriculum.

In the same way, both supervisors and teachers need to use comprehensive teaching frameworks not just for summative teacher evaluation, but rather to guide improvement throughout the school year. Used in this way, these frameworks can create a common language for practice, focusing teachers' collaborative efforts to identify and implement specific research-based instructional strategies and behaviors.

We need to transcend the common practice of making administrators the primary users of comprehensive teaching frameworks. At a minimum, teachers can use comprehensive frameworks to guide their daily practice—for example, to assist in lesson planning, prioritize strategies for whole-group instruction, or select alternative strategies for students who require more challenge or support.

In several schools and districts where we have worked, teachers have used the framework as the starting point of a comprehensive self-assessment process; they identify specific skills for improvement and obtain feedback through such activities as peer observation, video analysis, peer discussion, and student surveys. The opportunity to self-reflect and engage in professional discussions with peers helps teachers clarify how they should invest their efforts to grow in the profession.

Expertise only emerges through deliberate practice.

Becoming an expert in a complex field like teaching is difficult and elusive. We believe that developing expertise is *the* central goal of a quality supervisory and evaluation system.

Anders Ericsson, widely credited as the world's foremost expert on expertise, describes how people develop expertise through deliberate practice—concentrating on carefully selected, specific aspects of performance and refining them through repetition and response to feedback (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006). For a musician, this could mean focusing on a specific passage of music for an extended time. For a teacher, this could mean focusing on a specific skill, such as asking higher-level questions or increasing wait time.

Like a veteran concert violinist who is still expanding his or her repertoire, a teacher can engage in deliberate practice throughout his or her career and still have areas to improve. There is no shame in a violinist acknowledging the need to practice for dozens of hours and hundreds of repetitions to learn to play a new piece of music. Why, then, are we reluctant to acknowledge that a teacher may take dozens of hours to learn a new instructional strategy? As a profession, we need to transcend the idea that only teachers who are struggling need an improvement plan. If the school views the need for improvement as a liability, why would teachers ever acknowledge their need for deliberate practice?

In working with schools on supervision and self-assessment, we've found it is essential to begin with an introduction to the research on expertise. This ensures that supervisors and teachers see terms like *practice*, *growth*, *improvement*, *learning*, and *effort* as assets to embrace rather than as liabilities to avoid. In this frame, we understand that becoming an expert teacher is not a gift bestowed on a chosen few but a journey through a challenging, thorny pathway that requires constant pruning. As one teacher wrote after engaging in a self-assessment process,

You see movies like Freedom Writers and you get this idea that there are magical teachers who come in and do this amazing job, and all the kids are enraptured with learning. Then you think, "Oh, I don't have the gift." You know what? I just need to keep working at it. ... It's really about my own commitment to growing as a professional and continuing that process indefinitely.

Supervisors are not the only source of data and feedback.

A recent study titled *The Widget Effect* (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009) identifies a lack of feedback as the primary problem with teacher supervision and evaluation systems. The authors found that "nearly three of four teachers went through the evaluation process but received no specific feedback about how to improve their practice" (p. 14). Even when supervisors do provide feedback, it is often too infrequent to improve performance.

We've frequently heard teachers express frustration when their supervisor implies there are *no* areas they need to improve. One teacher said that she felt cheated after being told for years by her supervisor that everything was fine. After engaging in a year of self-assessment that included analyzing videos of her own teaching, she realized she had many opportunities to improve; she felt empowered by the realization that she no longer had to passively "wait for the principal to come in" and hope for meaningful feedback.

Creating a system that helps teachers themselves generate continual, accurate feedback can enable them to improve. Once a school has established a shared understanding of a model of effective teaching, individual teachers can use a wide range of approaches to generate and receive feedback without the involvement of a supervisor (Marzano,

Frontier, & Livingston, 2011). These approaches include student surveys that ask students about the frequency of effective teaching behaviors, self-directed video analyses of specific components of one's own teaching, collegial dialogues, and instructional rounds that enable teachers to reflect on visits to other teachers' classrooms.

Honoring adults as self-directed learners encourages them to tackle more rigorous improvement goals.

Of course, teachers cannot direct all components of a supervision and evaluation system. But allowing teachers to generate data about their own teaching, identify their own areas of focus, and establish their own improvement goals can increase teacher motivation and engagement. When teachers participate in these self-assessment protocols, they are remarkably adept at identifying specific areas of need and pathways to improvement (Mielke, 2012).

Observation and evaluation by a supervisor may take place three times a year or even less frequently. In contrast, self-directed improvement becomes a habit of mind that guides teachers' instructional decisions every day. After engaging in a variety of self-assessment strategies, one teacher wrote,

I think any of those things individually might have had a minor impact on my teaching, but the peer observation, combined with the video observation, combined with the group discussion ... together provided a really powerful experience in terms of being able to say, "There are some really specific things I can do right now, and some things I can do down the road."

For most teachers who engage in these processes, this awareness results in a set of specific—and ambitious—improvement goals. When adult learners are empowered to objectively analyze and understand their own practice and have a clear vision of where they can improve, they are intrinsically motivated to embark on a pathway that leads to expertise.

Beyond High-Stakes Evaluation

If we use a research-based teaching framework for summative teacher evaluation but fail to use it to support teacher's efforts to become reflective practitioners on a pathway toward expertise, we are trying to obtain ideal results by using only half of the equation. Three days of high-stakes testing does not improve student learning, and three days of high-stakes evaluation does not improve teacher performance. Only by empowering teachers as the central users of comprehensive teaching frameworks can we ensure that the evaluation system improves teacher effectiveness, rather than merely measuring it.

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